FAITH'S COSTLY VENTURE

August 24, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." --Luke 14:26 (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 14:25-33

The idea that you and I begin to live fully when we find something to live for is at the heart of the matter. It is that we begin to live with something approaching our full potential when something comes into our lives and commands our loyalty, allegiance, passion; that the full range of possibility comes into focus when something is important enough that we would sacrifice for it, suffer for it if need be. That idea shows up in strange and interesting places. The motion picture, About Last Night, may offend conventional morality, but among the issues it explores is this one. It is about a young man and young woman who live in the particular world of single adult culture on the Near North Side of Chicago - the focal point of which is the Singles Bars on Division Street. They cannot - rather he cannot - reach deeply inside himself in order to be committed to her: to rearrange the priorities of his superficial, self indulgent life in order to live for someone else. As the movie proceeds, without ever quite resolving the issue, by the way, one sees the poignancy, the aloneness, the essential emptiness of a life that is not lived for someone or something.

The same idea runs through Robert Bolt's brilliant play A Man for All Seasons. Thomas More, 16th century Chancellor of England, has come into conflict with Henry, his King, and shortly will be tried - and convicted - of treason. Thomas More has not spoken out against his King or his King's marriage, or his King's claim of sovereignty over the Church. He simply will not sign an oath which approves and endorses the King's acts. The issue which emerges in all this, of course, is the big one - for whom do you live? To whom are you willing to give yourself? Is there something inside...a hard core of integrity, which you cannot violate and for which you would accept suffering and death?

Richard Rich is the ambitious young protagonist, who for his own political advancement will lie about More and provide the King the rationale he needs to execute him. Listen to a bit of early dialogue between these radically different men:

Richard Rich: But every man has his price!

Thomas More: No - no - no.

Rich: But yes! In money too.

More: (with gentle impatience) No - no - no.

Rich: Or pleasure. Letters, women, bricks and mortar. There's always something.

More: Childish.

Rich: Well, in suffering certainly.

More: (interested) Buy a man with suffering?

Rich: Impose suffering, and offer escape.

More: Oh. For a moment I thought you were being more profound.

Thomas More, that is to say, is intrigued, not by the possibility of tangible rewards - money, sex, power. His price - is not these - but something important enough to command his allegiance and call for suffering. The playwrite is probing the human spirit deeply at this point, approaching an issue that is more important to each of us than any other. It is not to go out and find some way to suffer, a kind of artificial martyrdom. It is that our wholeness, our fulfillment as persons, what religion calls our salvation, depends on our finding something that claims us, commands our passion, calls out of us our deepest commitment.

That is what Jesus taught one day in an incident reported in Luke's Gospel. Large crowds of people were following Jesus around the Galilean countryside. They were there when he taught, when he ate his meals, when he tried to find a place to sleep. They were there to hear what he said and perhaps because they sensed the growing conflict and the inevitability of tragedy, waiting as it were, for the disaster. One time, as Luke tells it, he turned around, and said something the Bible scholars call "a hard saying." It is that indeed... "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disicple... Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has, cannot be my disciple."

How could he say such a thing? Did he mean, literally, that following him meant contradicting the noblest instincts of our humanity - loving our families? That to be a Christian you

have to hate your parents - your spouse - your children? We know, intuitively, that it could not be that. We know, because we have seen it tragically and graphically in recent years, that religion which undercuts and destroys the basic relationships of our humanness is sick religion: that the cults which make the denial and severing of family ties the precondition of membership are guilty of exploiting people who need help. We have seen that kind of religion become tragically demonic.

It is helpful to recall that one of the ten moral foundations of Jesus' culture was - "Honor your father and mother," and to recall that he honored his mother, that she was part of the band of disciples, that as he was dying he was still concerned for her, tending to her care. The scholars help us understand this "hard saying" by pointing out that the Aramaic Jesus spoke was an extraordinarily vivid language, and that it is common in Semitic rhetoric, to make a strong point by dramatic contrast. "If you want to love God - you have to hate everything else." "If you love the Sox - you have to hate the Yankees or the Brewers." That's hyperbole. It is not precise ethical instruction. It meant that to follow Jesus is a costly venture which involves real sacrifice and an often painful reordering of priorities. What he meant was that to follow him was more demanding than a pleasant two week sojourn in the hill country of Galilee. It had to do with something so big and so important - namely the integrity and meaning and fulfillment of individual life - that everything else pales by comparison. He used the strongest language possible because he was asking people to save their lives by giving them away.

The touble we have with that is that not many of us ever had to make a difficult decision for Christ. We do not ordinarily perceive the Christian religion in these radically "either/or" terms. Not many of us had to sacrifice very much. Most of us did not walk away from parents and family and culture to follow Jesus - although many of the people who first read Luke's Gospel certainly did. In fact, our parents dressed us up and bundled us into a church and and had the mark of Jesus placed on us in baptism before we had much to say about the matter. Unlike the people for whom this was written - we didn't have to decide between our families and Jesus. In fact, the very opposite of that dynamic was and is often the case. Sometimes people reject the Church and the Christian faith in the process of asserting themselves against parental authority or adult culture in general. That's another story, the first line of which goes, "I don't come to church because my parents made me attend every week." That has more to do with Oedipus than Jesus, I think. In any event, deciding to be a Christian was not a terribly costly venture for most of us. Nor is maintaining religion at a respectable level a terribly costly enterprise. You want to stir up a bunch of Presbyterians just suggest that their political and economic views ought to reflect their faith and not vice versa: or that Jesus' standards of discipleship are not quite fulfilled by a financial commitment of several dollars per week. It's no

wonder these radical demands make us uncomfortable.

And yet, it seems that throughout the long history of the church, someone somewhere has always been paying dearly for the faith. Almost on behalf of the rest of us history has treated benevolently, someone somewhere is standing up courageously and putting life itself on the line. You know the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor-theologian, who wrote so profoundly about the Cost of Discipleship in the nineteen thirties and then paid that cost himself in a Nazi Concentration Camp. Some of you know, perhaps not as personally as I do, about men and women who heard the call of Christ in the Civil Rights Movement, who felt compelled by their Lord to take a stand and paid a very dear price for it.

Alan Paton has continued to remind the world of the dear price paid by courageous Christians in South Africa. In his book, Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful, a distinguished jurist is invited by the pastor of the Holy Church of Zion to participate in the Maundy Thursday rite of foot washing. In fact, he is invited to wash the feet of Martha Fortuin, the black woman who has helped to raise his children. Judge Oliver accepts the invitation. "She has washed the feet of all my children. Why should I hesitate to wash her feet?" But the act and the publicity that followed cost him the chief justiceship. Paton's book is fiction, but there are Christian men and women, black and white, in South Africe making very difficult decisions and very costly commitments, trying - against enormous odds - to avoid the extremes approving, cooperating with, endorsing of the oppressive system of apartheid on the one hand, and the prospect of a violent revolution on the other hand.

It is not easy, nor safe, to be a Christian today in Belfast where, in the name of patriotism and religion, Protestant para-militaries kill Catholics who step out of line and the IRA shoots at Protestants.

What a privilege it was last April to hear The Reverend Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian Missionary in Lebanon, one of the seven hostages, talk about his experience as a prisoner of Moslem extremists and on that evening to meet and express our concern and our solidarity with the family of Father Lawrence Jenco. Father Jenco, happily released since then, and Ben Weir who was elected Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), are honest, dedicated disicples of Jesus who had their priorities straight and whose commitment to Christ compelled them to live and witness and work in a place where their faith became a very costly venture.

Christianity both fascinates and repels us because it suggests that there is a price to be paid: that in order to be a Christian you have to submerge your own self, negate your own self, negate your own personhood...in Jesus' words "hate your own life." This, I believe, is the critical juncture of Christian

theology. Denying self is not an end in itself. Rather we believe that authentic selfhood and true life begins when we decide to live for Jesus Christ.

The social scientists assure us that somewhere along the line we have to decide to be. Most adolescent rebellion, for instance, is the normal and healthy process of a person deciding to be a person (although sometimes it doesn't feel so healthy when one is the object of the process!). Rollo May said it clearly...

"An assertion of the self, a commitment is essential if the self is to have any reality. ...a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them." The Courage to Create, p. 5.

We become full human beings, that is to say, when from somewhere deep inside ourselves we decide to be. That sounds like an abstraction. But the decision to be takes shape in very real decisions to live for something or someone other than ourselves. It's a magnificent thing to behold, to see it actually begin to happen in children, for instance; to witness the first deep giving of self, to see a person begin to emerge as the child begins to give himself or herself...to a sport, or music, or a school project, or a teacher. It's moving to see your child - or any at bat, in a recital, taking a test; to know that they are having to reach inside and be a person alone. The real person in us emerges when we begin to live for someone else. Rollo May put that exquisitely... "The essence of being human is that, in the brief moment we exist on this spinning planet, we can love some persons and some things..." [Ibid p. 19]

Think about your strongest choices - your deepest commitments -

I pledge allegiance to the flag...and to the Republic for which it stands...

Alma Mater, thy sons and daughters, honor thee...

I solemly swear to accept the responsibilities of this office...

I take thee to be my wedded wife/husband, and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses...

We promise, in dependence on the grace of God, to bring up our child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord...

Somewhere in the midst of those promises, those choices and commitments, or ones like them, your particularity and strong personhood emerges. Somewhere in the process of giving yourself away to these commitments your own life enlarges and takes on new meaning and worth. And one place further -

Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you intend to be his disciple and show his love?

The particularity of Christianity and faith's costly venture begins here. The highest, noblest expression of your humanity and mine emerges when we respond to God's love in Jesus Christ by deciding, by chosing, by committing everything we are to him: by putting him at the center: by reordering our priorities, in whatever words we chose, to say and to mean, "Lord - take my life. Live through me." We are never more fully alive, never more human, than in that commitment.

Christianity, someone said recently, is not good advice but good news. The Gospel of Christ is not simple maxims for successful living, it is news of a powerful love that can turn your life around and fill it with significance and joy. How sad it is to live without anything compelling our devotion. How tragic to live without anything important enough to command our passion.

Bonhoeffer realized that short of that we are, very simply, short changing ourselves. By softening and disguising the demand for total commitment the church, he said, is guilty of dispensing "cheap grace." In powerful words that were, in his own life, prophetic, he wrote:

> "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's who had to leave the monastery and go into the world. But it is the same death every time - death in Christ Jesus..." [The Cost of Discipleship, p. 79]

Thank God we have not been asked to die physically. Perhaps we will not be asked. Perhaps we will be asked for something that is sometimes more difficult: to persevere - to live faithfully in a skeptical, secular society that no longer values faith and sometimes laughs at it. Perhaps we will be asked to be honest in a world that does not reward integrity. Perhaps we wil be asked to be just and loving in a time and place when love and justice seem soft, irrelevant, naive; to forgive and to believe in the power of compassion in a world that has given up on forgiveness and compassion. Perhaps we will never be called to dramatic public martyrdom but to something more difficult, to day-in - day-out, lonely faithfulness. Perhaps you and I will live out our lives without ever coming to one clear moment of truth when we must say yes or no. Perhaps, for us, it will be a sequence of moments, of small, seemingly undramatic decisions to "hang in there for Jesus," to love when we don't

feel like loving, to care when we are weary of caring, to re-think old values and adopt new, Christ-informed values.

To be a Christian in every age is a costly venture. The price - the bottom line - is your most precious possession, that thing you and you alone own solely - your heart, your soul, your life. He said that to be his man, his woman, you must give your life to him. It was, he said, like picking up your cross as he picked up his, and falling in behind him. As you do that tentatively, in the midst of the routines of your life, please remember two things:

-you are not alone in that line of disciples

and

-Jesus died on his cross. Therefore it is not simply your burden to carry. It is the sign of his love for you. It is your salvation. To pick it up and carry it is to be alive, fully and gloriously alive.

Amen.

Lord God forgive us for the timidity of our faith. Forgive us for trivializing your love by withholding so much. Help us to see that what you offer us is our true and best life. So, give us courage to follow your son, to be his men and women. Give us the strength we need; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.